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ABSTRACT

Hispanic women still face educational and employment handicaps rooted in racial and sex-related discrimination. Because Hispanic women are the product of two cultures (the traditional Mexican American culture inside the home and the dominant American culture outside the home), they sometimes face a struggle. Although research indicates that Mexican American girls have higher aspirations and think learning is more important than do Mexican American boys, they still receive less schooling. Under 6% graduate from college, as compared to 9% of Mexican American males. Their low educational attainment may be due to the fact that school is unrelated to success in traditional Mexican American roles. Their educational and occupational attainment may be restricted by their adherence to traditional cultural values which emphasize male supremacy, maternal self-sacrifice, and the maintenance of family roles at the expense of other roles for women. While elementary and secondary teachers should be sensitive to the culture of Hispanic women in order to avoid home-school conflicts, counselors should guide Hispanic women towards non-traditional careers. Texts and other classroom materials should avoid perpetuating stereotypes about Hispanic female submissiveness. Further study of the subject is needed. (SB)

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Chicanas and Higher Education

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Chicanas and Higher Education

ABSTRACT

This article touches on some of the reasons Hispanic women still face racial as well as sex-related handicaps in the employment and educational areas. Focusing on some of the research which has been made, particularly as it relates to the Mexican-American female, some questions are raised as to how the schools, teachers, and universities can play a more important role in increasing the number of chicanas in higher education. The author concludes that there is a definite and strong link between the Mexican-American female's attitude towards school and her Mexican-American cultural values that will either motivate her to continue towards higher education or will discourage her to pursue her academic achievements. Although much of the article deals with the Texas locale, some of the obstacles faced by the chicana in general are suggested as well as the need for future studies to improve the status of chicanas in higher education.

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CHICANAS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

One of the major socioeconomic occurences of the mid-twentieth century in the United States has been the growth in the proportion of women who work outside the home. The rise in labor force participation among American women is rooted in many factors. Among these are increases in educational attainment and declines in fertility, both giving women the opportunity to compete in a labor market that is increasingly accepting of working women. The number of Hispanic women in the labor force in the United States grew by nearly one-third from 1973 to 1977, far above the increase for all women. This rise in the number of Hispanic women in the labor force resulted mainly from an increase in the working-age population. Hispanic women still face racial as well as sex-related employment handicaps. In 1974 a slightly greater percentage of Hispanic women as compared with Anglo women, worked full-time the year round but they were more concentrated in unskilled blue-collar and service occupations. The greatest increase took place in clerical employment with lesser gains in service work and professional and technical jobs.[1]

According to a recent report released by the Texas Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, job discrimination against minorities and women in Texas is "almost as bad as it was in 1968." The report shows that minorities and women remain mired in low-paying, low-ranking jobs in the areas of public employment, education, political participation and the administration of justice. The situation in Texas is consistent with the rest of the nation according to Arthur Fleming, head of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission.[2] In general, the jobs in which women are concentrated pay lower salaries than those paid in traditionally male-dominated positions, even when these positions involve equivalent skill, effort, and responsibility. The earnings gap between minority women and majority men is even more pronounced.

College-level discrimination is perhaps most severe among the ranks of faculty and college administrators. Women are only 25 percent of full-time faculty; they are clustered at the lower professional ranks, and their status has been described as "sliding slowly downhill."[3] If this picture for women in general sounds bleak, consider the plight of the Hispanic woman. Only 6 percent of Latina population go into higher education. The Hispanic Americans have been cited as the fastest growing minority in the United States. Fifty percent of these Americans are women. These very numbers guarantee that Hispanics will play an increasingly important role in shaping American and feminist politics and policies. Historically however, Hispanic women have shared a situation complicated by struggle within a society that has failed to honor, understand and to acknowledge their culture or even their right to a culture. Hispanic women have also faced the universal victimhood of sexism.[4]

In Texas it is estimated that one out of every five children attending public school comes from a home where Spanish is the dominant language. The high dropout rate of Mexican-Americans attests to the fact that Mexican-Americans receive or complete less education than the Anglo and the black student. The breakdown between males and females is not available, but generally it has been assumed that educational and occupational achievements were not relevant for women because of the social norm that work was primarily a male domain. We can only guess at the number of Mexican-American females who might possibly have continued into higher education if they had not been dropouts. In Texas the Mexican-American female is generally a product of two cultures: the traditional Mexican-American culture which she experiences at home, and the dominant American culture which she experiences almost everywhere else, especially at school. Some believe there exists a good deal of conflict among Mexican-American females regarding her role. Many are struggling for greater equality and a greater range of personal and vocational choices within the dominant society as well as the Mexican-American culture.

Contrary to what might be expected from the data on educational attainment, Mexican-American girls have higher aspirations than Mexican-American boys. Wages et al. (1969) found that while most students desired a high school education, one-half of the boys and three-quarters of the girls expected to finish high school. Espinoza, Fernandez and Dornbusch (1975) found that Mexican-American girls chose professions as possible occupations more frequently than the boys did. This sex difference in aspirations also seemed to be related to attitudes toward school. Mexican-American girls perceived their friends as believing that learning, grades and hard work were more important than Mexican-American boys did. They concluded that the available evidence indicated that Mexican-American girls have higher aspirations than boys and that within their peer group girls are perceived as thinking school was more important than did the boys.[5]

The importance of education as training for future work is stressed in our American society. Thomas Carter argues that schools have failed Mexican-Americans by "encouraging the very practices that inhibit Mexican-American achievement and attainment."[6] Because educational institutions are related to political and economic institutions, Carter proposes that the social system is maintained by perpetuating the relative position of minorities in the socioeconomic institutions. The result is that students attain educations that qualify them for entry into jobs currently held by Mexican-Americans. Thus, although Mexican-Americans have completed more education than in the past, their educational attainment is low relative to other groups and hence, they are able to enter only a limited range of occupations. The educational and occupational aspirations of Mexican Americans are high compared to their parents' generation but they remain low compared to other ethnic groups.[7]

Espinoza, Fernandez, and Dornbusch (1975) found that the students' perception of the link between school and their future work was related to

attitudes toward school and effort. The greater the link between school and their future, the more importance on school and the greater the effort the student expended. Although these students saw a connection between school and their future work, many of the Mexican-American students were poorly prepared in basic skills and therefore may not have had the skills required for the jobs and education they desired.

For many Mexican-American girls, work may not be a significant consideration in their aspirations. Traditionally, the Mexican family was founded on the supremacy of the father and the corresponding total self-sacrifice of the mother. The Mexican-American female in the past has generally been groomed very early towards her destiny in the home as a devoted mother and wife and with all the appropriate feminine skills. Any attempt to achieve academically or professionally has in the past, often been viewed as unfeminine and has been discouraged. Although the family structure is changing somewhat due to the post-industrial period in the United States, and even though some women are acquiring more freedom and economic independence, the large majority of Mexican-American females, whether employed or not, continue to carry the major responsibility for organizing and completing the domestic tasks of the home. There still seems to be a clear division of labor within the Mexican-American home and a division of the male-female sex roles continue to be apparent in most Mexican-American families.

What role should the universities play in preparing teachers for the future decades? Today, parents, students, and teachers now have more knowledge about the problems facing Mexican-American students in school. However, problems such as the difficulty with the English language, differences in customs, and lack of understanding between students and teachers persist as serious barriers to learning by Mexican-Americans. Some problems at school have their roots in the home. Many parents have not placed sufficient importance upon education

while other parents dislike schools because their children learn new customs that upset the traditional family life. Many Mexican-American students feel a conflict of loyalty between the responsibilities of home and of school. In many cases it is necessary for children to work rather than to attend school. Across the vast Southwest, thousands of Mexican-American families follow the crops as laborers in the fields. Their children move from school to school or do not attend at all. Mexican-Americans living in the cities generally gain more education than those in rural areas. Some of the special needs, such as counseling and learning English as a second language, are now receiving more attention. However, the Mexican-American female receives less schooling than her male counterpart in all areas of the educational ladders. Less than 6 percent of Spanish-Origin females finish college as compared to 9 percent of the Spanish-Origin males (U.S. Census, 1978). It seems important that during the early educational years, the Mexican-American female have teachers who are cognizant and sensitive to her culture in order to avoid any conflict between the home and school. Elementary and secondary counselors need to guide the Mexican-American female towards a career other than the traditional "homemaking" or "file-clerk" career. Great improvements have been made in the selection of textbooks during the past decade and continuous attention needs to be given to ensure that unbiased and accurate sex roles and image of the Mexican-American female be portrayed in textbooks and classroom materials. Too much of previous research has been done by Anglo males and this has resulted in faulty stereotyping of Hispanic and other minority women. Comwell and Ruiz (1979) undertook an intensive analysis of four major studies on marital decision-making in Mexican families in an effort to examine the "machismo" or male dominance concept. They concluded that the available empirical evidence failed to substantiate the hypothesis of male dominance in marital decision-making. Their work challenges the male-dominance myth,

noting that the stereotype is perpetuated through impressionistic essays, and because the study identifies the roots of the stereotype as being embedded in the social model of Hispanic life and culture rather than in a realistic model. The implication for Mexican-American women, as they point out, is the need to question the myth about Hispanic women's alleged submissiveness.[8]

On the other hand, Beals and Humphrey conducted a study which indicates that the Mexican-American, in many cases, has clung to culture values and patterns with a seeming stubbornness. This tendency has, in the eyes of many, prevented assimilation into the American cultures or at least has retarded the process of acculturation. Following are some student values of Mexican-Americans which they summarized as a result of their study:

1. First loyalty is owed to the family.
2. Men are superior to women.
3. The mother is the center of the home.
4. Love is both tragic and romantic.
5. Race, caste, and class are important for status and character.
6. La raza (Latin culture) is the source of spiritual unity.
7. One should always defend "la patria" (one's country).
8. The old ways are better.
9. Religion is the basis of society and the moral order.
10. Education is the basis of social approval.
11. Ritual is to be valued.
12. Death is to be accepted.
13. Life is to be lived dramatically.
14. Music is a true expression of Mexico.
15. The individual personality is to be valued.[10]

The emphasis on family roles may keep Mexican-American women from fulfilling their potential in terms of achievement. Their low educational achievement may be due to the fact that in many cases, school may be unrelated to success in family roles. Since the emphasis is generally on the male sex role as being the economic provider, the Mexican-American female does not experience any pressure to pursue academic achievements. Insofar as sex roles within the Mexican-American family emphasize family roles for women at the expense of other roles, the educational and occupational attainment of

women may be restricted. Hernandez (1967) found that girls felt it was necessary to help raise the family when the mother was absent even if this activity conflicted with school.[11] Others have emphasized the primary maternal role; i.e., women, particularly mothers, are expected to put the needs of others before their own needs.[12]

Clearly it seems that there is a strong link between the Mexican-American female's attitude towards school and her Mexican-American cultural values that will motivate her to continue towards higher education or will discourage her to pursue her academic achievements. The review of the literature would indicate that further study is needed to determine the factors that influence Mexican-American females to continue their education. In particular, more research should be made of the influencing factors on those Mexican-American females who have continued their education and now work in public or private institutions of higher education. A greater understanding and awareness of the Mexican-American female educator will emerge as well as factors related to obstacles or barriers which can help other aspiring Mexican-American females. Studies will also help to determine if minority women, in particular Mexican-American women, have indeed improved their situation, or if the popular slogan, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby!" is the biggest public relations myth of the century. Future studies to determine the status of Mexican-American women in higher education in Texas will have applicability and importance to women in general, and to other ethnic minority women as well.

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